DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 818 SO 018 523

AUTHOR Citti, Lori A.

TITLE Teaching about the Soviet Union. ERIC Digest No. 42.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Sep 87
CONTRACT 400-86-0020
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Area Studies; *Course Content; Curriculum Design; Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Enrichment; Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; Instructional Design; Instructional Development; Instructional Improvement; Political Science; *Social Studies; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Soviet Studies; *USSR

ABSTRACT

Given the global significance of Soviet-U.S. relations, elementary and secondary school students should learn about the Soviet Union, but most students graduate from high school with little knowledge and many misconceptions about this country. It is important to teach about the Soviet Union because of: (1) its emphasis in the U.S. media; (2) its size and cultural diversity; (3) its abundance of natural resources; and (4) its cultural contributions to life in the United States. In elementary school classes, teachers might compare and contrast U.S. regions and communities with those in the Soviet Union. A more focused examination can be achieved on the middle school level through the study of Soviet history, geography, and current events. High school world history classes should stress the teaching of Russian and Soviet history. Teaching strategies should include using an historical approach, teaching about the country's geography, comparing governmental and economic systems, stressing the cultural and ethnic diversity within the country, introducing primary sources, avoiding superficial conclusions, and presenting a balanced picture of the Soviet Union. (JHP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED286818

Teaching about the Soviet Union

by Lori A. Citti

Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405

SO018523

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC®

Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 (812) 335-3838

ERIC DIGEST NO. 42 September 1987

Teaching about the Soviet Union

by Lori A. Citti

Since the end of World War II, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics have engaged in cultural, political, and technological rivalries of unparalleled international importance. Given the global significance of Soviet-American relations, elementary and secondary school students should learn about the institutions and peoples of the Soviet Union. However, curriculum studies and assessments of learners suggest that most students graduate from high school with little knowledge and many misconceptions about the Soviet Union. How can curriculum developers and classroom teachers improve education on the Soviet Union? This ERIC Digest addresses three topics: (1) the importance of teaching about the Soviet Union, (2) the place of the Soviet Union in the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools, and (3) strategies for teaching about the Soviet Union.

Why is it Important to Teach about the Soviet Union?

- *As a major world power, the Soviet Union figures prominently in the American media.* Hardly a day passes without reference to the Soviet Union on national television or newspapers. The media, however, often present events without providing the historical or political background necessary to understand and interpret these events. As a result, many of our impressions of Soviet politics, economics, and daily life remain outdated or inaccurate.

- *The size and cultural diversity of the Soviet Union make it significant.* The Soviet Union consists of 15 republics and covers 8.5 million miles, roughly two and one half times the size of the United States. This makes the Soviet Union a country of considerable geographical, national, and cultural diversity. Americans often fall into the trap of the "Great Russian" bias, referring to all Soviet citizens as Russians, when in fact Russians make up only 52 percent of the total population (approximately 280 million people).

- *The Soviet Union contains an abundance of the world's natural resources.* The regions beyond the Ural mountains and Siberia have proven rich in natural resources. The U.S.S.R. possesses half of the world's reserves of iron ore, as well as tungsten, nickle, copper, lead, zinc, gold, silver, and diamonds. The Soviet Union is the world's largest exporter of oil. Despite these riches, geographical location and climatic conditions make resource use difficult and expensive. Most of the U.S.S.R.'s energy resources (coal, oil, gas, and hydroelectric power) are located in the east, while the major industries and population centers are located in European Russia.

- *Russia and the Soviet Union have made important cultural contributions to life in the United States.* People around the world enjoy the writings of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekov and the music of Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, and Stravinsky. In the United States, Russian immigrants have added much to the cultural development of America. In the early nineteenth century, Russian fur-traders played a significant role in the settlement of the Pacific Northwest. More recently, George Balanchine, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and other emigres have made important contributions to the dance repertoires of American ballet companies. Most major U.S. cities also contain large Russian communities where one can find stores and restaurants specializing in traditional Russian foods and delicacies.

Where Does the Soviet Union Belong in the Curriculum?

Teaching about the Soviet Union is appropriate at every level of the social studies curriculum as part of a global perspective in education. Gradually, good elementary and secondary classroom materials are becoming available, although many still retain obvious factual and interpretive biases. As with the study of other societies and cultures, the study of the Soviet Union should be used to introduce new perspectives. Viewing life through Russian, Ukrainian, or Kirgiz eyes can be exciting, as well as enlightening, and can dispel the monolithic image many people have of Soviet citizens.

- *At the elementary level, consider comparing and contrasting regions and communities of the United States with communities and regions in the Soviet Union.* Both countries have a rich diversity of geographical regions and a variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious traditions. Studying immigrant communities within the United States, such as the Russians, Ukrainians, or Armenians, provides an obvious way of integrating material on both the United States and the Soviet Union.

- *The study of history, geography, and current events in the middle school allows a more focused and detailed examination of the Soviet Union.* Detailed treatment of the history and contemporary society of the Soviet Union become possible at this time. Despite the numerous differences in their histories, political systems, and cultures, many of the problems faced by the United States are also faced by the Soviet Union. Looking closely at environmental issues, alcoholism, the plight of agriculture, or unemployment provides a way of seeing both similarities and differences in the United States and the Soviet Union.

- *The high school curriculum offers a major opportunity for the study of the Soviet Union in world history courses.* History plays an important role in our understanding of the politics and official culture of the Soviet Union. Many of our biases and misinterpretations about life and politics in the Soviet Union stem from an inadequate or simplistic view of Soviet history. Some problems

---

Lori A Citti is a doctoral student in Russian/Soviet history at Indiana University. She served as a graduate assistant at the Indiana University Russian and East European Institute from 1984 through 1986 and has given lectures to high school and elementary students and teachers through the REEI outreach program.

faced by the Soviet Union today existed during the Tsarist period and can be ascribed to highly centralized governments in general. Content on the Soviet Union might be infused into standard high school government or economics courses in the form of lessons on centrally planned economics or government bureaucracy.

What Strategies Might be Used to Teach about the Soviet Union?

- *Emphasize an historical approach to the study of the Soviet Union.* History is one of the keys to understanding institutions and patterns of culture in the Soviet Union today. Above all, it is necessary to understand that the Soviet Union has not followed a direct line of development. Like other nations, the Soviet Union has gone through periods of crisis, reform, and conservative reaction. A close examination of the domestic policies of Soviet leaders reveals government uncertainty, stasis, and attempts to reform an often cumbersome system of political administration.
- *Use geography as a means of interpreting and understanding some of the problems facing the Soviet Union today.* The geographical location of the Soviet Union affects agriculture, transportation, and the use of natural resources. Moscow and Leningrad are located on northerly latitudes roughly equivalent to points in Ontario Province and Anchorage, Alaska, respectively. Agriculturally, this means the Soviet Union has an extremely short growing season. Weather conditions are often severe and highly variable. As a result, food supplies vary dramatically from city to city and region to region. Large areas of the Soviet Union remain frozen in winter and undergo surface thaw resulting in swamplike conditions during warmer months, hindering road construction and transportation to the outreaches of Siberia.
- *Compare and contrast governmental and economic systems and the social values underlying these institutions.* Comparing the American and Soviet constitutions provides one important exercise. Much can be learned by examining the content, beliefs, and traditions surrounding these documents.
- *Emphasize the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Soviet Union as a means to counteract commonly held stereotypes.* The U.S.S.R. is made up of fifteen union republics, each containing a number of ethnic and minority groups. Spend time looking at the different ethnic groups, religions, and languages of Soviet citizens. There are approximately 130 different languages spoken. Ethnic groups within the U.S.S.R. include Russians, Armenians, Belorussians, Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Georgians, Moldavians, Tartars, Kirgiz, Jews, Chuvash, Bashkirs, Poles, and many others. Aside from official atheism, Soviet citizens practice Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Lutheranism, and a variety of other world religions.
- *Take advantage of glasnost and use primary sources to develop skills in critical thinking.* In 1987, the Soviet Union has figured prominently in the U.S. and world media. The *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*, and other major newspapers and magazines regularly feature articles on life in the Soviet Union. Primary sources in English, such as *Moscow Daily News*, *Pravda*, and *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, can be used to introduce the Soviet perspective on world events. Glossy magazines published in English and printed in the Soviet Union, such as *Ukraine*, *Soviet Life*, and *Soviet Uzbekistan*, can be used to introduce the Soviet nationalities into the classroom. Using materials such as newspapers and magazines enables students to deal with primary sources and discover first-hand the differences in U.S. and Soviet news coverage.
- *Avoid superficial conclusions, examine exceptions to generalizations, and present a balanced picture of the U.S.S.R.* Emphasizing both the positive and negative aspects of daily life in the Soviet Union is important in any study of the U.S.S.R. Remember, the Soviet Union suffered destructive wars during the first forty years of its existence. Lifestyle, goods, and services have improved steadily, albeit slowly, for the average citizen during the span. Many economic and social problems that continue to confront the Soviet people, such as housing shortages, growing urban violence, and alcoholism, are also faced by people in the United States.

Teachers may help students understand the dual nature of Soviet government by studying both the party structure and the government structure of the Soviet Union. Bear in mind, however that only 6-10 percent of the population holds membership in the Communist Party. Students should study the party hierarchy, the centrally planned economy and government, and the bureaucratic administration. Many of the problems confronting the Soviet Union today can be ascribed to most highly centralized forms of government throughout the world. Visualizing the difficulty of coodinating goods and services for a country the size of the U.S.S.R. from one central location (Moscow), will help students see why reformers like Khrushchev and Gorbachev have tried to introduce experiments with decentralized control.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a list of resources, including references used to prepare the Digest. Those items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE *(Current Index to Journals in Education)* which is available in libraries containing ERIC collections. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries using the bibliographic information provided below.

Brown, Archie, et. al., editors. THE CAMBRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Gilbert, Martin. ATLAS OF RUSSIAN HISTORY. Great Britain: Dorset Press, 1985.

Goldman, Minton. THE SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE. Connecticut: Global Studies, Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc., 1986.

Howe, G. Melvyn. THE SOVIET UNION: A GEOGRAPHICAL STUDY. Second edition. Great Britian: MacDonald and Evans, Ltd., 1983.

Jones, Dianna. RUSSIAN STUDIES: TEACHING AMERICAN ELEMENTARY-MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN ABOUT RUSSIA. ED 252 492

Katz, Lev, et. al. HANDBOOK OF MAJOR SOVIET NATIONALITIES. New York: The Free Press, 1975.

Keetz, Frank."Theory vs. Reality: Use of The Soviet Constitution of 1977 As a Primary Source." SOCIAL EDUCATION, (March 1985): 233-235.

LEARNING ABOUT THE SOVIETS: SELECTED TEACHING RESOURCES. Cambridge: Educators for Social Responsibility, 1985. ED 268 031.

US/USSR TEXTBOOK STUDY PROJECT: INTERIM REPORT. Social Studies Development Center. Bloomington, IN. 1981. ED 210 213.

Westwood, J.N.ENDURANCE AND ENDEAVOR: RUSSIAN HISTORY 1812-1980. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0020. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the postitions or policies of OERI or ED.